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WHAT IS RELIGION?

A Lecture by the late

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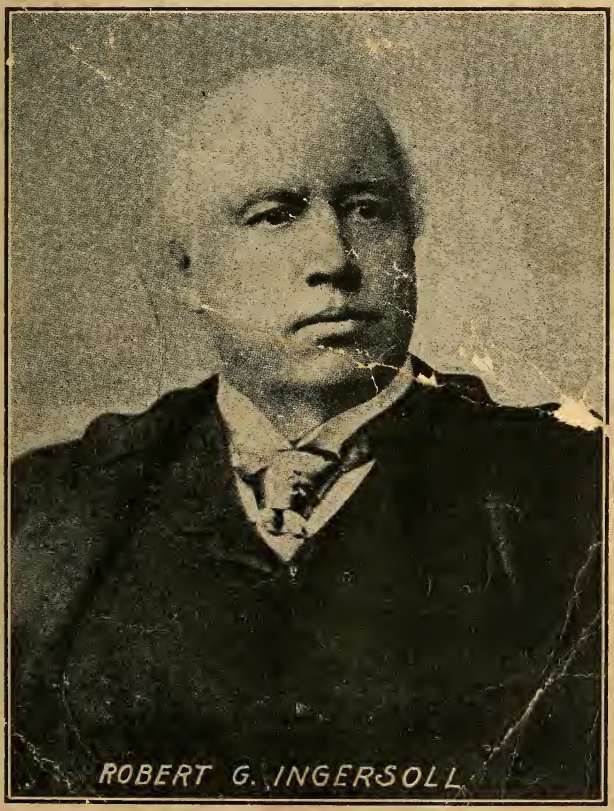

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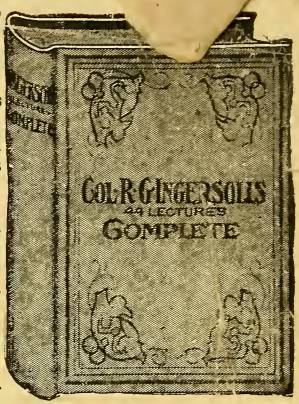

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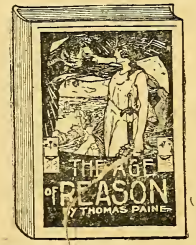

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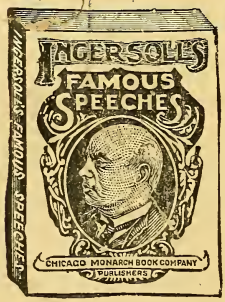

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WHAT IS RELIGION?

BY

COL. ROBERT G. INGERSOLL

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What is Religion?

It is asserted that an infinite God created all things, governs all things, and that the creature should be obedient and thankful to the creator; that the creator demands certain things, and that the person who complies with these demands is religious. This kind of religion has been substantially universal.

For many centuries and by many peoples it was believed that this God demanded sacrifices; that he was pleased when parents shed the blood of their babes. Afterwards it was supposed that he was satisfied with the blood of oxen, lambs and doves, and that in exchange for or on account of these sacrifices, this God gave rain, sunshine and harvest. It was also believed that if the sacrifices were not made, this God sent pestilence, famine, flood and earthquake.

The last phase of this belief in sacrifice was, according to the Christian doctrine, that God accepted the blood of his son, and that after

his son had been murdered he, God, was satisfied, and wanted no more blood.

During all these years and by all these peoples it was believed that this God heard and answered prayer, that he forgave sins and saved the souls of true believers. This, in a general way, is the definition of religion.

Now the questions are, Whether religion was founded on any known fact? Whether such a being as God exists? Whether he was the creator of yourself and myself? Whether any prayer was ever answered? Whether any sacrifice of babe or ox secured the favor of this unseen God?

First.—Did an infinite God create the children of men?

Why did he create the intellectually inferior?

Why did he create the deformed and helpless?

Why did he create the criminal, the idiotic, the insane?

Can infinite wisdom and power make any excuse for the creation of failures?

Are the failures under obligation to their creator?

Second.—Is an infinite God the governor of this world?

Is he responsible for all the chiefs, kings, emperors, and queens?

Is he responsible for all the wars that have been waged, for all the innocent blood that has been shed?

Is he responsible for the centuries of slavery, for the backs that have been scarred with the lash, for the babes that have been sold from the breasts of mothers, for the families that have been separated and destroyed?

Is this God responsible for religious persecution, for the Inquisition, for the thumb-screw and rack, and for all the instruments of torture?

Did this God allow the cruel and vile to destroy the brave and virtuous? Did he allow tyrants to shed the blood of patriots?

Did he allow his enemies to torture and burn his friends?

What is such a God worth?

Would a decent man, having the power to prevent it allow his enemies to torture and burn his friends?

Can we conceive of a devil base enough to prefer his enemies to his friends?

If a good and infinitely powerful God governs this world, how can we account for cyclones, earthquakes, pestilence and famine?

How can we account for cancers, for mi-

crobes, for diptheria and the thousand diseases that prey on infancy?

How can we account for the wild beasts that devour human beings, for the fanged serpent whose bite is death?

How can we account for a world where life feeds on life?

Were beak and claw, tooth and fang, invented and produced by infinite mercy?

Did infinite goodness fashion the wings of the eagles so that their fleeing prey could be overtaken?

Did infinite goodness create the beasts of prey with the intention that they should devour the weak and helpless?

Did infinite goodness create the countless worthless living things that breed within and feed upon the flesh of higher forms?

Did infinite wisdom intentionally produce the microscopic beasts that feed upon the optic nerve?

Think of blinding a man to satisfy the appetite of a microbe?

Think of life feeding on life! Think of the victims! Think of the Niagara of blood pouring over the precipice of cruelty!

In view of these facts, what, after all, is religion?

It is fear.

Fear builds the altar and offers the sacrifice.

Fear erects the cathedral and bows the heads of man in worship.

Fear bends the knees and utters the prayer.

Fear pretends to love.

Religion teaches the slave-virtues—obedience, humility, self-denial, forgiveness, non-resistance.

Lips, religious and fearful, tremblingly repeat this passage; "Though he slay me, yet will I trust him." This is the abyss of degradation.

Religion does not teach self-reliance, independence, manliness, courage, self-defence. Religion makes God a master and man his serf. The master cannot be great enough to make slavery sweet.

2.

If this God exists, how do we know that he is good? How can we prove that he is merciful, that he cares for the children of men? If this God exists, he has on many occasions seen millions of his poor children plowing the fields, sowing and planting the grain, and when he saw them he knew that they depended on the expected crop for life, and yet this good God, this merciful being, withheld the rain. He caused the sun to rise, to steal all moisture from the land, but gave no rain. He saw the seeds that man had planted wither and perish, but he sent no rain. He saw the people with sad eyes upon the barren earth, and he sent no rain. He saw them slowly devour the little that they had, and saw them when the days of hunger came, saw them slowly waste away, saw their hungry, sunken eyes, heard their prayers, saw them devour the miserable animals that they had, saw fathers and mothers, insane with hunger, kill and eat their shriveled babes, and yet the heaven above them was as brass and

the earth beneath as iron, and he sent no rain. Can we say that in the heart of this God there blossomed the flower of pity? Can we say that he cared for the children of men? Can we say that his mercy endureth forever?

Do we prove that this God is good because he sends the cyclone that wrecks villages and covers the fields with the mangled bodies of fathers, mothers and babes? Do we prove his goodness by showing that he has opened the earth and swallowed thousands of his helpless children, or that with the volcanoes he has overwhelmed them with rivers of fire? Can we infer the goodness of God from the facts we know?

If these calamities did not happen, would we suspect that God cared nothing for human beings? If there were no famine, no pestilence, no cyclone, no earthquake, would we think that God is not good?

According to the theologians, God did not make all men alike. He made races differing in intelligence, stature and color. Was there goodness, was there wisdom in this?

Ought the superior races to thank God that they are not the inferior? If we say yes, then I ask another question: Should the inferior races thank God that they are not superior,

or should they thank God that they are not beasts?

When God made these different races he knew that the superior would enslave the inferior, knew that the inferior would be conquered, and finally destroyed.

If God did this, and knew the blood that would be shed, the agonies that would be endured, saw the countless fields covered with the corpses of the slain, saw all the bleeding backs of slaves, all the broken hearts of mothers bereft of babes, if he saw and knew all this, can we conceive of a more malicious fiend?

Why, then, should we say that God is good?

The dungeons against whose dripping walls the brave and generous have sighed their souls away, the scaffolds stained and glorified with noble blood, the hopeless slaves with scarred and bleeding backs, the writhing martyrs clothed in flame, the virtuous stretched on racks, their joints and muscles torn apart, the flayed and bleeding bodies of the just, the extinguished eyes of those who sought for truth, the countless patriots who fought and died in vain, the burdened, beaten, weeping wives, the shriveled faces of the neglected babes, the murdered millions of the vanished years, the victims of the winds and waves, of flood and flame, of imprisoned forces in the earth, of lightning

stroke, of lava's molten stream, of famine, plague and lingering pain, the mouths that drip with blood, the fangs that poison, the beaks that wound and tear, the triumphs of the base, the rule and sway of wrong, the crowns that cruelty has worn and the robed hypocrites, with clasped and bloody hands, who thanked their God—a phantom fiend—that liberty had been banished from the world, these souvenirs of the dreadful past, these horrors that still exist, these frightful facts deny that any God exists who has the will and power to guard and bless the human race.

3.

THE POWER THAT WORKS FOR RIGHTEOUSNESS.

Most people cling to the supernatural. If they give up one God, they imagine another. Having outgrown Jehovah, they talk about the power that works for righteousness.

What is this power?

Man advances, and necessarily advances through experience. A man wishing to go to a certain place comes to where the road divides. He takes the left hand, believing it to be the right road, and travels until he finds that it is the wrong one. He retraces his steps and takes the right hand road and reaches the place desired. The next time he goes to the same place, he does not take the left hand road. He has tried that road, and knows that it is the wrong road. He takes the right road, and thereupon these theologians say, "There is a power that works for righteousness."

A child, charmed by the beauty of the flame, grasps it with its dimpled hand. The hand is burned, and after that the child keeps its hand out of the fire. The power that works for right-

eousness has taught the child a lesson.

The accumulated experience of the world is a power and force that works for righteousness. This force is not conscious, not intelligent. It has no will, no purpose. It is a result.

So thousands have endeavored to establish the existence of God by the fact that we have what is called the moral sense; that is to say, a conscience.

It is insisted by these theologians, and by many of the so-called philosophers, that this moral sense, this sense of duty, of obligation, was imported, and that conscience is an exotic. Taking the ground that it was not produced here, was not produced by man, they then imagine a God from whom it came.

Man is a social being. We live together in families, tribes and nations.

The members of a family, of a tribe, of a nation, who increase the happiness of the family, of the tribe or of the nation, are considered good members. They are praised, admired and respected. They are regarded as good; that is to say, as moral.

The members who add to the misery of the family, the tribe or the nation, are considered bad members. They are blamed, despised, punished. They are regarded as immoral.

The family, the tribe, the nation, creates a

standard of conduct, of morality. There is nothing supernatural in this.

The greatest of human beings has said, "Conscience is born of love."

The sense of obligation, of duty, was naturally produced.

Among savages, the immediate consequences of actions are taken into consideration. As people advance, the remote consequences are perceived. The standard of conduct becomes higher. The imagination is cultivated. A man puts himself in the place of another. The sense of duty becomes stronger, more imperative. Man judges himself.

He loves, and love is the commencement, the foundation of the highest virtues. He injures one that he loves. Then comes regret, repentance, sorrow, conscience. In all this here is nothing supernatural.

Man has decieved himself. Nature is a mirror in which man sees his own immage, and all supernatural religions rest on the pretence that the image, which appears to be behind the mirror, has been caught.

All the metaphysicians of the spiritual type, from Plato to Swedenborg, have manufactured their facts, and all founders of religions have done the same.

Suppose that an infinite God exists, what can

we do for him? Being infinite, he is conditionless; being conditionless, he cannot be benefited or injured. He cannot want. He has.

Think of the egotism of a man who believes that an infinite being wants his praise.

4.

What has our religion done? Of course, it is admitted by Christians that all other religions are false, and consequently we need examine only our own.

Has Christianity done good? Has it made men nobler, more merciful, nearer honest? When the Church had control, were men made better and happier?

What has been the effect of Christianity in Italy, in Spain, in Portugal, in Ireland? What has religion done for Hungary or Austria? What was the effect of Christianity in Switzerland, in Holland, in Scotland, in England, in America? Let us be honest. Could these countries have been worse without religion? Could they have been worse had they had any other religion than Christianity?

Would Torquemada have been worse had he been a follower of Zoroaster? Would Calvin have been more bloodthirsty if he had believed in the religion of the South Sea Islanders? Would the Dutch have been more idiotic if they had denied the Father, Son and Holy Ghost, and worshipped the blessed trinity of sausage, beer

and cheese? Would John Knox have been any worse had he deserted Christ and become a follower of Confucius?

Take our own dear, merciful Puritan Fathers? What did Christianity do for them? They hated pleasure. On the door of life they hung the crape of death. They muffled all the bells of gladness. They made cradles by putting rockers on coffins. In the Puritan year there were twelve Decembers. They tried to do away with infancy and youth, with prattle of babes and the song of the morning.

The religion of the Puritan was an unadulterated curse. The Puritan believed the Bible to be the word of God, and this belief has always made who held it cruel and wretched. Would the Puritan have been worse if he had adopted the religion of the North American Indians?

Let me refer to just one fact showing the influence of a belief in the Bible on human beings.

"On the day of the coronation of Queen Elizabeth she was presented with a Geneva Bible by an old man representing Time, with Truth standing by his side as a child. The Queen received the Bible, kissed it, and pledged herself to diligently read therein. In the dedication of this blessed Bible the Queen was piously exhorted to put all Papists to the sword."

In this incident we see the real spirit of Prot-

estant lovers of the Bible. In other words, it was just as fiendish, just as infamous as the Catholic spirit.

Has the Bible made the people of Georgia kind and merciful? Would the lynchers be more ferocious if they worshipped gods of wood and stone?

5.

HOW CAN MANKIND BE REFORMED WITHOUT RELIGION?

Religion has been tried, and in all countries, in all times, has failed.

Religion has never made a man merciful.

Remember the Inquisition.

What effect did religion have on slavery?

What effect upon Libby, Saulsbury and Andersonville?

Religion has always been the enemy of science, of investigation and thought.

Religion has never made man free.

It has never made man moral, temperate, industrious and honest.

Are Christians more temperate, nearer virtuous, nearer honest than savages?

Among savages do we not find that their vices and cruelties are the fruits of their superstitions?

To those who believe in the Uniformity of Nature, religion is impossible.

Can we affect the nature and qualities of substance by prayer? Can we hasten or delay the tides by worship? Can we change winds by sacrifice? Will kneelings give us wealth? Can we cure disease by supplication? Can we receive virtue or honor as alms?

Are not the facts in the mental world just as stubborn—just as necessarily produced—as the facts in the material world? Is not what we call mind just as natural as what we call body?

Religion rests on the idea that Nature has a master and that this master will listen to prayer; that this master punishes and rewards; that he loves praise and flattery and hates the brave and free.

Has man obtained any help from heaven?

6.

If we have a theory, we must have facts for the foundation. We must have corner-stones. We must not build on guesses, fancies, analogies or inferences. The structure must have a basement. If we build, we must begin at the bottom.

I have a theory and I have four corner-stones.

The first stone is that matter—substance—cannot be destroyed, cannot be annihilated.

The second stone is that force cannot be destroyed, cannot be annihilated.

The third stone is that matter and force cannot exist apart—no matter whithout force—no force without matter.

The fourth stone is that which cannot be destroyed could not have been created; that the indestructible is the uncreatable.

If these corner-stones are facts, it follows as a necessity that matter and force are from and to eternity; that they can neither be increased nor diminished.

It follows that nothing has been or can be

created; that there never has been or can be a creator.

It follows that there could not have been any intelligence, any design back of matter and force.

There is no intelligence without force. There is no force without matter. Consequently there could not by any possibility have been any intelligence, any force, back of matter.

It therefore follows that the supernatural does not and cannot exist. If these four corner-stones are facts, Nature has no master. If matter and force are from and to eternity, it follows as a necessity that no God exists; that no God created or governs the universe; that no God exists who answers prayer; no God who succors the oppressed; no God who pities the suffering of innocence; no God who cares for the slaves with scarred flesh, the mothers robbed of their babes; no God who rescues the tortured, and no God that saves a martyr from the flames. In other words it proves that man has never received any help from heaven; that all sacrifices have been in vain, and that all prayers have died unanswered in the heedless air. I do not pretend to know. I say what I think.

If matter and force have existed from eternity, it then follows that all that has been possible has happened, all that is possible is hap-

pening, and all that will be possible will happen.

In the universe there is no chance, no caprice. Every event has parents.

That which has not happened, could not. The present is the necessary product of all the past, the necessary cause of all the future.

In the infinite chain there is, and there can be, no broken, no missing link. The form and motion of every star, the climate of every world, all forms of vegetable and animal life, all instinct, intelligence and conscience, all assertions and denials, all vices and virtues, all thoughts and dreams, all hopes and fears, are necessities. Not one of the countless things and relations in the universe could have been different.

7.

If matter and force are from eternity, then we can say that man had no intelligent creator, that man was not a special ~~creator~~ creation.

We know, if we know anything, that Jehovah, the divine potter, did not mix and mould clay into the forms of men and women, and then breathe the breath of life into these forms.

We now know that our first parents were not foreigners. We know that they were natives of this world, produced here, and that their life did not come from the breath of any god. We now know, if we know anything, that the universe is natural, and that men and women have been naturally produced. We now know our ancestors, our pedigree. We have the family tree.

We have all the links of the chain; twenty-six links inclusive from moner to man.

We did not get our inspiration from inspired books. We have fossil facts and living forms.

From the simplest creatures, from blind sen-

sation, from organism, from one vague want, to a single cell with a nucleus, to a hollow ball filled with fluid, to a cup with double walls, to a flat worm, to a something that begins to breathe, to an organism that has a spinal cord, to a link between the invertebrate to the vertebrate, to one that has a cranium—a house for a brain—to one with fins, still onward to one with fore and hinder fins, to the reptile mammalia, to the marsupials, to the lemures, dwellers in trees, to the simiæ, to the pithecanthropi, and, lastly, to man.

We know the paths that life has traveled. We know the footsteps of advance. They have been traced. The last link has been found. For this we are indebted, more than to all others, to the greatest of biologists, Ernst Haeckel.

We know the paths that life has traveled. We and we deny the existence of the supernatural.

8.

REFORM.

For thousand of years men and women have been trying to reform the world. They have created gods and devils, heavens and hells; they have written sacred books, performed miracles, built cathedrals and dungeons; they have crowned and uncrowned kings and queens; they have tortured and imprisoned, flayed alive and burned; they have preached and prayed; they have tried promises and threats; they have coaxed and persuaded; they have preached and taught, and in countless ways have endeavored to make people honest, temperate, industrious and virtuous; they have built hospitals and asylums, universities and schools, and seem to have done their very best to make mankind better and happier, and yet they have not succeeded.

Why have the reformers failed? I will tell them why.

Ignorance, poverty and vice are populating

the world. The gutter is a nursery. People unable even to support themselves fill the tenements, the huts and hovels with children. They depend on the Lord, on luck and charity. They are not intelligent enough to think about consequences or to feel responsibility. At the same time they do not want children, because a child is a curse, a curse to them and to itself. The babe is not welcome, because it is a burden. These unwelcome children fill the jails and prisons, the asylums and hospitals, and they crowd the scoffolds. A few are rescued by chance or charity, but the great majority are failures. They become vicious, ferocious. They live by fraud and violence, and bequeath the vices to their children.

Against this inundation of vice the forces of reform are helpless, and charity itself becomes an unconscious promoter of crime.

Failure seems to be the trademark of Nature. Why? Nature has no design, no intelligence. Nature produces without purpose, sustains without intention and destroys without thought. Man has a little intelligence, and he should use it. Intelligence is the only lever capable of raising mankind.

The real question is, can we prevent the ignorant, the poor, the vicious, from filling the world with their children?

Can we prevent this Missouri of ignorance and vice from emptying into the Missippi of civilization?

Must the world forever remain the victim of ignorant passion? Can the world be civilized to that degree that consequences will be taken into consideration by all?

Why should men and women have children that they cannot take care of, children that are burdens and curses? Why? Because they have more passion than intelligence, more passion than conscience, more passion than reason.

You cannot reform these people with tracts and talk. You cannot reform these people with preach and creed. Passion is, and always has been, deaf. These weapons of reform are substantially useless. Criminals, tramps, beggars and failures are increasing every day. The prisons, jails, poor-houses and asylums are crowded. Religion is helpless. Law can punish, but it can neither reform criminals nor prevent crime. The tide of vice is rising. The war that is now being waged against the forces of evil is as hopeless as the battle of the fireflies against the darkness of night..

There is but one hope. Ignorance, poverty and vice must stop populating the world. This cannot be done by moral suasion. This cannot be done by talk or example. This cannot be

done by religion or by law, by priest or by hangman. This cannot be done by force, physical or moral.

To accomplish this there is but one way. Science must make woman the owner the mistress of herself. Science, the only possible saviour of mankind, must put it in the power of woman to decide for herself whether she will or will not become a mother.

This is the solution of the whole question. This frees woman. The babes that are born will be welcome. They will be clasped with glad hands to happy breasts. They will fill homes with light and joy.

Men and women who believe that slaves are purer, truer, than the free, who believe that fear is a safer guide than knowledge, that only those are really good who obey the commands of others, and that ignorance is the soil in which the perfect, perfumed flower of virtue grows, will with protesting hands hide their shocked faces.

Men and women who think that light is the enemy of virtue, that purity dwells in darkness, that it is dangerous for human beings to know themselves and the facts in Nature that affect their well being, will be horrified at the thought of making intelligence the master of passion.

But I look forward to the time when men

and women by reason of their knowledge of consequences, of the morality born of intelligence, will refuse to perpetuate disease and pain, will refuse to fill the world with failures.

When that time comes the prison walls will fall, the dungeons will be flooded with light, and the shadow of the scaffold will cease to curse the earth. Poverty and crime will be childless. The withered hands of want will not be stretched for alms. They will be dust. The whole world will be intelligent, virtuous and free.

9.

Religion can never reform mankind because religion is slavery.

It is far better to be free, to leave the forts and barricades of fear, to stand erect and face the future with a smile.

It is far better to give yourself sometimes to negligence, to drift with wave and tide, with the blind force of the world, to think and dream, to forget the chains and limitations of the breathing life, to forget purpose and object, to lounge in the picture gallery of the brain, to feel once more the clasps and kisses of the past, to bring life's morning back, to see again the forms and faces of the dead, to paint fair pictures for the coming years, to forget all gods, their promises and threats, to feel within your veins life's joyous stream and hear the martial music, the rhythmic beating of your fearless heart.

And then to rouse yourself to do all useful things, to reach with thought and deed the ideal in your brain, to give your fancies wing, that they, like chemits bees, may find art's nectar

in the weeds of common things, to look with trained and steady eyes for facts, to find the subtle threads that join the distant with the now, to increase knowledge, to take burdens from the weak, to develop the brain, to defend the right, to make a palace for the soul.

This is real religion. This is real worship.

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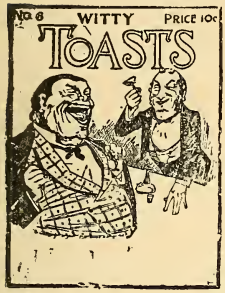

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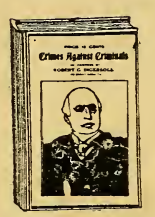

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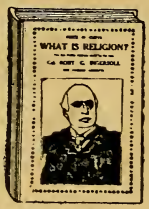

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